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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SARAJEVO 002270

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SCE (HOH/FOOKS)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [BK](#)

SUBJECT: BOSNIA - STALEMATE OVER CATHOLIC CHURCH PERMIT

REF: SARAJEVO 1806

Classified By: Michael J. Murphy for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During recent visits to Sarajevo, prominent Catholic Church (hereinafter "Church") officials have highlighted their concerns over a seven-year wait for permission to build a new church in the Sarajevo neighborhood of Grbavica. Although the Church has made several requests for a building permit, authorities of the Novo Sarajevo Municipality tell us that the Church has not followed the correct application procedures. We recently discussed the permit application with Church officials and offered several suggestions for resolving the problem. These suggestions, however, were met with little or no enthusiasm. In addition, several contacts have suggested a dispute between the Archbishopric and the Jesuits over control of the parish is complicating efforts to secure the permit. All of this raises questions in our mind about how important the Grbavica permit is to the Bosnian Catholic Church. END SUMMARY.

Background

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12. (SBU) Grbavica rests in the only parish in Bosnia and Herzegovina administered by Jesuit priests. For the past 25 years, these priests have used the basement of a private home to hold services and perform religious duties. (Note: Although not ideal, this practice is common among all religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. End Note) In June 2000, the priests requested permission from the municipal authorities of Novo Sarajevo to build a larger and more permanent church in the vicinity of their current premises. The municipality rejected their request, explaining that the Church had asked for a much larger plot of land than what had been foreseen in the municipality's urban plan. In addition, the municipality replied that plans were already underway to use the prospective plot for a sports complex.

13. (SBU) Church authorities, led by Archbishop of Vrhbosna Diocese Vinko Cardinal Puljic, and the Jesuit priests then sent a new request asking the municipality for an alternative location. The municipality forwarded this request to the Sarajevo Canton Spatial Planning Institute which finally, in 2005, suggested that the church could be constructed on land that is currently a park. The Municipal Council accepted this proposal, but Grbavica residents rejected it during public debate, claiming that it would deprive them of the only available play-area for their children. (Note: These same residents also reportedly objected to the construction of a mosque in the same park for the same reason, but the mosque has since been constructed in the park. According to the municipality, the paperwork for the mosque was submitted prior to the Church's request, but the Church disputes this fact. End note.)

14. (C) In May 2006, Zeljko Komsic, current Croat Presidency Member and then Mayor of Novo Sarajevo, met with Church representatives, cantonal authorities and Jesuit priests to resolve the permit issue. During the meeting, Komsic offered the original location requested by the Jesuits, since plans for a sports complex and swimming pool in the same location had been canceled. The Jesuits tell us they accepted Komsic's proposal and submitted all necessary documentation to finalize the plan a few days later. The Archbishopric, however, claims that the municipality never responded to the new request for the permit. Komsic claims that it was the Catholic Church who froze all contact with the municipality. He believes Cardinal Puljic forbade the Jesuits from pursuing the matter. When we contacted the Jesuits to schedule a meeting about the permit, the parish priest told us to first call the competent individuals in Vrhbosna Archbishopric, saying they have the sole and ultimate authority to speak on this issue. He then added "if we had the authority, we would have handled things differently."

#### Playing the Blame Game

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15. (C) During recent visits to Sarajevo, prominent Catholic Church officials from the Vatican and the U.S. have highlighted their concerns over the Grbavica church permit, often using it as an example of the type of discrimination the Bosnian Croat minority population faces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Following up on these accusations, we met with Novo Sarajevo Mayor Nedžad Koldzo, a Bosnian Muslim. Mayor Koldzo explained that the municipality's urban plan foresees

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the presence of a Catholic church, but that Church officials have neither followed the correct application procedures nor filed the correct paperwork to formally request the permit. Additionally, he explained that all applicants seeking valuable land plots in the municipality must go through the same uniform application procedures, including public tender.

The Mayor claimed that the municipality is very cautious about this because they do not want to be perceived as playing favorites -- especially with religious communities.

16. (C) When asked about their previous correspondence with the municipality, Church officials told us that instead of applying to the requisite Department for Urbanism, the church has been writing directly to the Mayor's office. The Church believes the municipality should just donate the land like other neighboring municipalities have done, instead of burdening the Church with lengthy paperwork and the financial burden of a public tender. They fear that if forced to a tender, their limited funding would not be enough to outbid other contenders with deeper pockets. They told us that the Mayor is using the bureaucratic process as a front to deny the permit to prevent the church's construction and to win a larger sum from the sale of the land.

#### Proposing a Way Forward

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17. (C) In a recent conversation with Cardinal Puljic and his advisors, we suggested that the Church apply for the permit through the process requested by the municipality, i.e. to apply to the Department of Urbanism and go to public tender to purchase the land. We also suggested that the Cardinal meet with Mayor Koldzo to discuss the issue openly and try to find a resolution. The Cardinal told us that he has tried to meet with Mayor Koldzo to discuss this issue in the past, but that the mayor has refused to see him. We informed him that we had met with Mayor Koldzo and had suggested a meeting and that he had been receptive to the idea. The Cardinal said he would "potentially" look into the situation later this fall and thanked us for our attention to the issue.

18. (C) It appears to us that the dispute over the Grbavica church permit is more than a straightforward case of discrimination, as the Catholic Church regularly asserts. It is true that the Mayor Koldzo's claim of paperwork irregularities is a common ploy used by municipalities in Bosnia to obstruct religious freedom. It is also true that resolution of this issue has taken much longer than it should have. However, it is quite possible that profit rather than an anti-Catholic bias is driving the municipality. In addition, our conversations with the Church suggest that the permit might not be as important to the Church as it claims. The Cardinal left us with the distinct impression he was in no hurry to resolve it and appeared uninterested in our effort to facilitate a meeting between him and Mayor Koldzo. There are also clear differences of opinion within the Church -- between the Archbishopric and the Jesuits -- about how to move forward. Some of our religious freedom and Catholic contacts have suggested that the Cardinal wants to take control of the Jesuits' parish and is using the permit dispute to justify installing his own priests. Whether this is true, our efforts to underscore to the Cardinal our continuing support for religious freedom and offer to arrange a meeting between Church and municipal officials has helped make clear that the U.S. concern for religious freedom extends to Bosnian Croats.

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